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Abstract

This article focuses on the trading trajectory of an Uzbek family of merchants from Tajikistan. This family runs businesses in both Tajikistan's capital, Dushanbe, and China's famous international trading city: Yiwu. The analysis is centred on the accounts placed by Tajikistan's Uzbek merchants about their historically sustained experience, often across several generations, in trading activities. These merchants' claims of belonging to a 'historical' trading community rather than being 'newcomers' to long-distance commerce are articulated in relation to notions of 'hierarchies of trade' as they evolve in a twofold relational model linking Yiwu's Changchun neighbourhood and Dushanbe. I suggest that the forms of conviviality enacted in Yiwu's Changchun neighbourhood need to be understood in terms of the historical, multinational and transregional contacts that have occurred within the spaces of the former Soviet Union, as well as along the China-Russia and China-Central Asian borders. Equally, the hierarchies of trade of Uzbek merchants from Tajikistan in Yiwu's Changchun neighbourhood cut-across markers of identity that juxtapose the roles of Tajik and Uzbek communities in Tajikistan's contemporary politics and economics.

Keywords: trade, hierarchies of trade, merchants, Yiwu, reputation, debt, Uzbek traders, Tajikistan

Introduction: At the dinner table

On leaving the main entrance of the 1st District of Yiwu's Futian Market and crossing Chouzhou Street using the underpass that is fitted with escalators, the neighbourhood immediately encountered is known as Changchun. Changchun's eateries, hotels, and cargo companies mostly display signboards in Cyrillic that bear names such as "Tashkent", "Tiflis", "Baku", "Somon", and "Chaikhana", and show maps with the routes used to deliver cargo to the Caucasus, the Russian Federation, Ukraine and the Central Asian republics. In an Uzbek restaurant located in this area of Yiwu, and over a bowl of mutton soup, Bahrom, a trader in his late 30s explains to me that he considers himself a 'successful' trader (*muafiq*; [he also clarifies in Russian *uspeshny*]).¹ Such success, Bahrom continues, is the result of his family's involvement in long-distance trade throughout generations.

Bahrom, a trader from Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe and who defines himself as Uzbek, has invited me to join him and his companions for dinner as I greeted them from the street while walking to the hotel 'Moscow', also located in Changchun. By that

stage of my research (August 2016) I had known Bahrom for nearly six months, and often spent time with him and his father, Aka Akmal, as well as his visiting mother and other acquaintances in this area of Yiwu – a city in China's Zhejiang Province with about 2 million inhabitants of which, approximately, 14,000 are foreigners (cf. Introduction in this issue; Jacobs 2016; Marsden 2017).² I sit with Bahrom and his companions, including on this occasion his longstanding Uyghur friend visiting Yiwu from Urumqi along with his fiancé, and two Russian-speaking Han-Chinese friends who work as translators and commercial agents in Yiwu. In a conversation combining languages that are intelligible to us as a group of diners (Russian, Tajik, Uzbek, Uyghur and Mandarin), Bahrom continues to illustrate why he considers his family-business to be profitable and rewarding, even if, he clarifies, they also experienced 'bad' times.³ Bahrom describes himself as one of the Central Asian traders who pioneered the region's commercial activities to Yiwu in the 2000s. He did this after having traded for several years between China and Tajikistan using the city of Urumqi in Xinjiang as a central node. Yet Urumqi, Bahrom boasts, is 'so close' to Tajikistan that 'everybody', including his 'grandmother', can 'easily' go from Dushanbe and buy goods. In contrast, Bahrom continues, Yiwu, two hours by train from Shanghai, is a city for more established merchants like him who have considerable experience, enough capital, and good knowledge of long-distance trade. Bahrom and other traders of similar background in Yiwu usually put an emphasis on their historical genealogies of merchants that have had an impact in their family business, and that precede their shuttle-trade enterprises in the 1990s.⁴ They share their family histories as well as their travel and commerce-related experiences during the everyday forms of sociality fostered in offices, cafes and restaurants in Yiwu's Changchun neighbourhood.

By stressing his experience in commerce that day, Bahrom is challenging the jokes that his Chinese companions and Uyghur friend have been cracking about him concerning a factory that supplied Bahrom bijouterie of a lower quality than the items for which he had paid. Although such stories of deceit orchestrated by Chinese suppliers are common in Yiwu and told by traders of all nationalities, the jokes in this specific context parallel the depictions that Russian-speaking Chinese, Uyghur and even Central Asian themselves often make about the unexperienced (*neopytnyi*) and stupid/naive (*tupoï*) nature of Central Asian and Russian traders, especially when compared to 'cunning' (*khitryi*) 'Arab' (*alabo*) traders who are recognised by many in

Yiwu as some of the most skilful trading groups in the city and beyond.⁵ Indeed, Bahrom later on tells me, when compared to other prosperous traders in Yiwu, Central Asian merchants like him usually end up resembling the ‘pitiful’ (*bechora*) *chelnoki* or small-scale traders who carry their merchandise in suitcases. *Chelnoki* (shuttle [trader]) is a character from which Bahrom and traders of similar background who had established trading companies in Yiwu attempt to distance themselves. Paradoxically, these traders also recognise the extent to which such type of smaller scale trade in the 1990s was implicated in the effective up-scaling of their commercial activities from Urumqi to Yiwu.⁶

During my encounters with Bahrom, his father, as well as other Tajik and Uzbek traders in Yiwu, several questions puzzled me: If numerous Central Asian traders began their careers in the 1990s with the boom of the shuttle-trade from Istanbul or Urumqi, why do Bahrom and other Uzbek traders from Tajikistan make claims about the long history of their trading activities? How do their previous commercial experiences in the Soviet era, and as traders in the 1990s play in their work and lives today, and in their self-perception as Uzbeks from Tajikistan? What type of phenomenon affords the possibilities of gathering together on a regular basis Russian-speaking Chinese and Uyghur traders, Uzbek and Tajik merchants and other people of similar backgrounds who work in Yiwu and are able to communicate in common languages? In other words, how are we to comprehend the particular arrangements of traders, intelligible languages, trans-regional legacies and diverse forms of shared sociality including stereotyping and mockery in Yiwu’s Changchun neighbourhood? By focusing on Bahrom and his family’s trading trajectory, I aim to respond to these questions by taking seriously Tajikistan’s Uzbek merchants’ assertions of belonging to a historical trading community rather than being ‘newcomers’ (*nawomada*) to long-distance trade. I will analyse these merchants’ claims in connection with the concept of ‘hierarchies of trade’ in two present-day contexts: Yiwu’s Changchun neighbourhood, and Tajikistan, more particularly Dushanbe.

Hierarchies of trade refer to stratified angles and avenues that fashion traders’ reputation, fame, wealth and location as they become articulated in specific contexts, and that turn out to be especially evident when traders compare their life and work to that of traders of different and/or their own national, ethnic and religious background with whom they interact (cf. Aslanian 2011; Greif 1989; Rabo 2005). The examination

of the trading trajectories of merchants from Central Asia and their related historical linkages reflected in everyday sociality in Changchun put into question the extent to which we should see the 1990s as a central temporal frontier to all forms of trade involving actors of the former USSR (cf. introduction, Ibañez Tirado 2015a, Skvirskaja in this issue). As well, there is a need for further considerations of the ways in which the experiences of trade during the USSR (ranging from those being categorised as semi-legal forms of commerce to others that involved smuggling) continue to bleed into forms of commerce important in the region today. The trading trajectories and genealogies of merchants such as Bahrom constitute part of these merchants' hierarchies of trade as articulated in Dushanbe and Yiwu, more particularly, in Changchun.

I suggest that the forms of conviviality enacted in Yiwu's Changchun neighbourhood are a reflection of the historical processes of endurance, disconnection and reconnection along the China-Russia-Central Asia zones of contact as now occurring in distinctive commercial hubs such as Yiwu; thus, everyday sociality in Changchun needs to be understood in terms of the multinational and transregional interactions that have occurred within the spaces of the former Soviet Union, and along the China-Russia and China-Central Asian borders. I also argue for a twofold relational model linking Yiwu and Dushanbe regarding hierarchies of trade. Not only in Yiwu's Changchun neighbourhood but also in Dushanbe, Bahrom's family's hierarchies of trade cut-across markers of identity that juxtapose the roles of Tajik and Uzbek communities in Tajikistan's contemporary politics and economics. Therefore, the hierarchies of trade of Uzbek merchants from Tajikistan in Yiwu's Changchun neighbourhood must be explicated in relationship to the context of contemporary political and economic affairs in Tajikistan. Against this background, Uzbek traders such as Bahrom express their inability to upgrade their commercial activities to more profitable sectors in Tajikistan as a form of marginalisation due to their Uzbek identity. Equally, the hierarchies of trade articulated in Dushanbe by these Uzbek merchants cannot be disentangled from their hierarchies of trade as played out in Yiwu, more specifically during the everyday sociality that bring together a diverse range of Russian-speaking traders and agents in Changchun.

Background: Tajikistan's Uzbek population and their commercial activities

Uzbeks constitute approximately 15.3 % of Tajikistan's population (Fumigalli 2007), and the traders which whom I spoke cite language as the principal marker of their Uzbek identity. Although they are proficient in Tajik, Uzbek and Russian, they consider Uzbek their mother tongue and the preferred language to communicate in domestic spaces and amongst relatives, friends and associates who also speak Uzbek (cf. Finke 2014; Liu 2012). As it will be clearer throughout this article, the distinctiveness of what constitute Uzbek identity in Tajikistan is historically contingent and, on the level of everyday experience, is revealed as an unfixed category (cf. Hierman 2015). In terms of their economic activities in Tajikistan, Uzbek traders do not form a single trading group but, rather, constitute poly-stranded networks that are active in different niches of the country's economy (cf. Marsden 2016a). Uzbek traders I met in the northern city of Khujand, for example, import merchandise from Yiwu to northern Tajikistan via Uzbekistan using rail freight transport. With the goods stored in Khujand (usually in Atush and Somon bazaar), these merchants then conduct trans-border trade with Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and also Russia in legal and semi-legal ways.

In Dushanbe, Uzbeks are popularly known by the city's dwellers for their key role in the city's restaurant sector, as well as in a range of new enterprises that involve, for example, the opening in the capital city of modernised supermarkets, wedding venues and indoor centres for children's leisure. Numerous Uzbek traders such as Bahrom usually own well-established whole-sale shops and warehouses in markets and bazaars (e.g. Kurbon, Sakhavod and Sulton Kabir bazaars in Dushanbe). Bahrom's family business mainly revolves around their running of wholesale shops and warehouses in different bazaars in Dushanbe and their trading company in Yiwu. They usually send their merchandise from Yiwu to Tajikistan by lorry via the Pamir highway and with the provision of a cargo company owned by Tajik traders from Dushanbe.⁷

The articulation of hierarchies of trade by Uzbek merchants from Tajikistan in Yiwu's Changchun neighbourhood and Dushanbe are positioned in relation to contemporary Tajikistan's politics especially concerning old and new processes of state-building and Tajik nationalism. At times, these processes are expressed in allegations of Tajik/Uzbek rivalry and other forms of internal regionalism that date from the formation of the Soviet republics onwards. The period between the Russian conquest of Central Asia's emirates and khanates and the formation of the USSR is the time at which the Tajik nation started to emerge through what Kassymbekova refers to as different

‘tactics of governance’ (2016:2). These included the fashioning of new territorial boundaries, the resettlement of ‘Tajik’ people, and the ubiquitous promotion of ‘Tajik’ language, literature and folklore (cf. Abashin 2004, Reeves 2014). Even if in the late 1950s some Soviet scholars had problems differentiating Uzbeks and Tajiks through processes of self-reference (Bergne 2007, Hirsch 2005), Horák documents (2010:72) how politicised academic discussions about the delimitations of Uzbek and Tajik identity involved intellectuals condemning those who supported pan-Turkism and later pan-Uzbekism as ‘Tajik traitors’ and ‘Uzbekified Tajiks’: they were accused of working in opposition to Tajikistan’s territorial integrity after the 1920s. The ideological deprecation of Uzbek markers of identity in Tajikistan has been exacerbated in the post-independent era, as nationalist discourses are also informed by the regularly tense geopolitical relations between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan over various themes that include the allocation of water and the Roghun Dam project (Ibañez Tirado 2015b), the historical sources of Tajikistan’s territory, culture and statehood (Ilkhamov 2004; Horák 2010; Kamoliddin 2006;), and the ownership of the historical cities of Bukhara and Samarkand.

It is not the purpose of this article to theorise Uzbek identity/ethnicity. Rather, this article adds to this body of scholarship by examining how ideological debates are reflected in the sociality among traders of Tajik and Uzbek background in China and Tajikistan. In Dushanbe, in a context where a clear-cut Tajik identity is constantly signalled by the exclusive promotion of Tajik history, ‘race’ and language fostered by government institutions, experienced Uzbek traders such as Bahrom *perceive* themselves as being incapable of keeping the growth of their commercial activities because of their underprivileged position as Tajikistan’s citizens of Uzbek background. Bahrom’s explanations on the lines of marginalisation, however, are not fully accountable for Bahrom’s and his family’s commercial stagnation in Dushanbe. Such explanations are also related to the ways in which hierarchies of trade are played out in Yiwu’s Chagnchun neighbourhood. Before analysing aspects of everyday sociality in Changchun, I now provide a summary of Bahrom’s family’s history as narrated to me by Bahrom himself and his father, Aka Akmal.

Trading genealogies: the case of Bahrom’s family

Bahrom's trading genealogy started with Aka Akmal's deceased father, whom they said, had already learned to trade from his father before the Soviet period in the Ferghana Valley in the beginning of the 20th century - although they did not have details about what their commercial activities had involved. Their merchant lineage moved in the present to Bahrom as the most skilful of Aka Akmal's offspring, yet also included Bahrom's brothers, his two sisters (in their early twenties) and his mother who also owned a shop and thus visited Yiwu and Guangzhou twice a year. Bahrom and Aka Akmal usually placed a strong emphasis on the role of their family as an entity whose members cooperated with one another, that had learned about commerce throughout generations, and that suffered the perils of long-distance trade and enjoyed its benefits together – even if conflict and misunderstandings over money and products were common.

Bahrom's paternal grandparents arrived in Tajikistan in the 1950s from Margilan, a town located in the Ferghana Valley in Uzbekistan. Bahrom's grandfather studied agronomy in Tashkent, and, after graduating, was relocated to Dushanbe where he worked in a series of water and agricultural projects, including several schemes for developing flower cultivation (especially roses and chrysanthemums). Aka Akmal, told me that although his family had not experienced economic problems, his father began to complement the family income with the sale of flowers grown in his garden. He used to take one or two boxes of flowers to Moscow where they commanded a good price: "By the time my father began his work-related trips (*komandirovka*) to Moscow we were experts in growing and keeping flowers fresh."

During the Soviet period Aka Akmal became a lorry-driver and drove between Tajikistan and Russia a *kamaz* (a type of Soviet-manufactured lorry) loaded with fresh and canned fruit and vegetables. A few years later, and with the help of his father, he became involved in the authorised transport (mainly by air) of flowers from Tajikistan to Moscow. In the early 1980s, by which point Bahrom was already 4 or 5 years old, Aka Akmal began to travel to New Delhi and Bangladesh to acquire flowers in authorised procurement journeys; he later traded some of these flowers in Soviet Russia in semi-legal ways (c.f. Lajipathi Rai 1991).⁸ During these trips, he became acquainted with Indian merchants who were interested in buying gold: Aka Akmal not only bought flowers in South Asia, but also started to sell gold jewellery that he personally had acquired from families in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. In those years

Bahrom, the eldest of Aka Akmal's six children, also started to trade flowers and textiles brought from India by his father firstly in his neighbourhood and sometime later in central Dushanbe.

Both Aka Akmal and Bahrom remembered that during Tajikistan's civil war (1992-1998) life in Dushanbe was hard not just because of the violence but also as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent economic crisis. Aka Akmal stopped traveling to Russia, India and Bangladesh, but started to drive to Regar, a small town close to the Tajik-Uzbek border. He became involved in purchasing 'everything' (*harchis* – e.g. goods of everyday use) in the border town and in the transport of these to Dushanbe – a journey that, as he recalled to me, meant he needed to interact with military and police check-points, bandits, and bullets flying in all directions. Bahrom, by then in his early teens, started to sell cigarettes that he procured from Afghan traders working in Dushanbe; by the end of the Tajik civil war (when roads were safer to travel along), he accompanied his father to Regar to buy smuggled petrol to Tajikistan from Uzbekistan. Aka Akmal transported the petrol in larger quantities to buyers in Dushanbe and beyond; at the same time, along with two of his friends (*jura*), he also became involved in the business of scrap metal (*metalicheskii lom*) and copper (*med'*). He explained to me:

"There were broken cars and old pipes and cables dumped here and there. I transported some of this stuff to my yard. I think it was 1994 or so, an Uzbek friend of mine who had worked in East Germany came with a German friend to Dushanbe. This man was interested in scrap metal especially copper. He had a company there. We became business partners".

The business of scrap metal and copper had been so profitable for Bahrom's family that having only pursued this line of business for three or four years they generated enough profit to last for six years. They bought land to build a grand family house, land for each of Aka Akmal's children, shops in the newly opened Sakhovad bazaar and land for a holiday house in the outskirts of Dushanbe. At the same time, Aka Akmal travelled to Urumqi for the first time in 1997, initially to procure batteries and small electronics, and, after some years, also mobile phones. In 2000 Bahrom travelled with his father to Urumqi to buy jewellery and cosmetics, a trade that he had himself launched. The year after, Bahrom's mother, who had previously managed the family's

shops in Dushanbe, also began to travel to Urumqi thereby becoming active in selecting new and fashionable designs for their products. In 2006, Bahrom made friends with a wealthy Uyghur man from Urumqi who was starting a building company in Xinjiang, but whose wife was living in Yiwu. He invited Bahrom to travel to Yiwu with him. Bahrom remembers:

“I call my father and tell him ‘I am flying to Yiwu.’ He tells me ‘you don’t have my permission’. He had never been there himself and did not know my new Uyghur friend. He was afraid that something bad could happen to me. In those times, we used to carry lots of cash. We have a fight over the phone. I travel to Yiwu and call him from there again. He is very angry about my disobedience. I tell him ‘Father! You don’t know how many things are sold here and at what prices!’ He hangs up the phone. I return to Dushanbe one week later, and when our goods arrive he is astonished. I bought so many beautiful things that we had never seen in Urumqi, and that customers had not seen in Dushanbe. We made a huge profit then.”

Bahrom and his father travelled to Yiwu twice a year between 2006 and 2012. In 2013 Bahrom finally decided to open his own trading company in Yiwu and to live most of the time in China. Bahrom was married in Dushanbe and he and his wife had two children, yet he wanted to expand his family business by supplying his and his family’s shops, and by working as an agent for the ‘inexperienced’ ‘newcomers’ from Tajikistan who had begun to travel from Urumqi to Yiwu. Bahrom’s clients usually stayed in Yiwu one or two weeks, placed orders and went back to Dushanbe to wait for the delivery which usually took between 40 to 60 days. Bahrom’s company helped them to find suppliers in Yiwu (usually in Futian market), inspected the merchandise once delivered by suppliers, arranged the documents required for exporting, and placed the goods in a cargo company. Using the name of his company, at times Bahrom also obtained for his clients goods on credit in Futian.

By narrating their family’s trading trajectory, Bahrom and Aka Akmal emphasised the skills and knowledge they had learnt from one another and from Bahrom’s grandfather. Besides, the knowledge and experience related to short and long-distance commerce throughout generations were the principal markers of the hierarchies of trade that Bahrom’s family employed to build a reputation for themselves in Yiwu. As a family of Uzbek traders, they have learnt how to work with different lines of products and in

diverse and often changing political contexts within Tajikistan and abroad; they also highlighted the ways in which they had not only survived, but also thrived in times of war. In the sixteen years that Bahrom had travelled between China and Tajikistan, he had achieved a good command of Chinese and Uyghur language, in addition to Russian and Tajik which he spoke fluently since his childhood. These skills and experiences, he said, allowed him to foster a good reputation in Yiwu and to attract new clientele. Building a good reputation involved efforts usually made in the convoluted sociality among traders, agents and clients in Yiwu's Changchun neighbourhood.

Hierarchies of trade in Yiwu's Changchun neighbourhood

In Yiwu hierarchies of trade, or the multifaceted avenues that traders articulate in relation to one another to build or maintain a reputable name, are usually expressed in terms of the traders' wealth and character, time of arrival to China and country of origin (Anderson in this issue; Belguidoum and Pliez 2015; Marsden 2016b; Skvirskaja in this issue). The foreign merchants who arrived earlier to China in the 1990s, and have established trading companies there might be in a better position than those who began to trade in more recent times; and those traders who run big companies with enough liquidity and clean credit-history are perceived as being more trustworthy than those traders who run companies based on the brokerage of credit from Chinese suppliers (cf. Anderson in this issue). At times, traders measure the size and reputation of their companies regarding the number of containers they export: whilst Bahrom's small company shipped half or one container every four/six weeks to Tajikistan, other companies ran by Afghans or Palestinians, for example, are able to ship an average of 30 containers per month. Hence, traders of recognised historical networks such as those of Arab, Indian and Afghan background in Yiwu are spoken about as being more reliable, skilful and thus prosperous than minor traders such as those of Russian or Central Asian background. Finally, hierarchies of trade are also expressed by, and discussed among traders on a day-to-day basis in Yiwu in relationship to the cars, offices, furniture and clothing they have and display, as well as their overall conduct in both the market-place and the spaces of leisure such as restaurants, cafes and nightclubs.

Foreign merchants in Yiwu aim to build or maintain a respectable position in the hierarchies of trade for different reasons which include attracting new clientele, business associates and even intimate companions; obtaining goods on credit, better prices or speed deliveries from Chinese suppliers, and modelling themselves as specific types of persons throughout their trading careers. The last aspect might include shaping oneself as a pious, cosmopolitan, modern, patriotic or morally-informed subject in relationship to specific understandings of religion, gender and age that vary according to the trader's place of origin, life-trajectory and particular aspirations. In Bahrom's and his family's case, their claims to their historical participation in trade are one of the multiple ways in which hierarchies of trade are articulated; as Rabo (2005) has shown for traders in Aleppo, claims to a reputable genealogy in commerce is part of how traders' build up a name. In Yiwu's Changchun neighbourhood, Bahrom and other Uzbek traders from Tajikistan emphasise their historic role as merchants in order to show to others that they are not inexperienced or new to commerce – as Russians and Central Asians are depicted by themselves and others as being. A day in Changchun involves the following vignettes.

Bahrom's office in Yiwu is located under a signboard in Cyrillic announcing the routes of a cargo company from Yiwu to Tashkent, Osh and beyond. There is also a map of Russia, Central Asia and China painted on the wall that, together with the numerous motorbikes that are parked in the vicinity, serves as an urban landscape for foreign and local traders in their way to Yiwu's Futian market. An Uyghur shop whose owner greets clients in Russian and Uzbek sits next to a Russian bakery whose owners arrived eight years ago to Yiwu from Vladivostok; and a Russian-speaking Han-Chinese who grew up in Khabarovsk in the late 1990s and works as a translator and agent in Yiwu has a casual chat with Sonya, a Russian woman from Vladivostok who recently opened a cargo company in the city and who says that she felt attracted to business because her grand-grandfather (who was married to a Chinese woman) traded in China in the early 20th century. In the evenings, Sonya closes her office and greets Bahrom and his father with her hand, but does not usually spend time with these men. Bahrom and his father gather with their friends (mainly other Uzbek, Tajik and Uyghur male traders and restaurateurs) to drink tea, smoke cigarettes and play *takht* - a board game similar to backgammon – nearby Sonya's office. Sonya refers to Bahrom and his father as 'respectful' traders, but she also clarifies that she prefers to

rent a flat in a 'good' area of Yiwu far from Changchun: Sonya finds this neighbourhood intimidating and dangerous at night when, she says, drunken Chinese men, wealthy Azeri macho-bravado with expensive cars and motorbikes, and 'unmannered' (*nevospitannye*) Central Asians harass Russian women like her, making rude and inappropriate remarks in the streets.

Not far from Sonya's office, in a nearby Armenian cafeteria, Larisa, a Russian waitress from eastern Ukraine, explains to me that her former employer, a Tajik man who owned a restaurant on the other side of the road, was abusive and harassed her. Larisa feels safer in her current job with 'cultured' Armenian traders who frequent this locale and who also speak Russian. The Tajik man who allegedly mistreated Larisa is also associated with a cargo company, jointly owned by a Russian-speaking Chinese man and his Russian partner: the company provides service to Russia, Ukraine and the Caucasus and gives the Tajik restaurateur a small commission for sending new clients. The Tajik restaurateur thus tells me that Larisa lies about his rude behaviour because the truth is that she attempted to 'steal' his Russian clients (mainly new traders on their first trip to Yiwu) and direct those to her husband's recently opened cargo-company. According to this Tajik and his Russian-speaking Han-Chinese friend, this new Ukrainian cargo-company is unsuccessful and unreliable – otherwise, they ask, why does Larisa need to work as a waitress? The Tajik and Chinese men conclude that, after all, Ukrainians are 'stupid' (*tupye*) in matters related to business. Another day Bahrom tells me that he does not know who to believe in this story – as gossip has spread out in Changchun about the unscrupulous behaviour of the Tajik restaurateur. The important issue for Bahrom, he says, is that unfortunately the restaurateur ends up giving a bad name to other traders from Tajikistan. This has implications for the reputation of small companies such as Bahrom's, as he also relies on finding new Russian-speaking clients from beyond Tajikistan in Changchun who need a translator and agent to accompany them to Futian Market.

Yiwu is a new commercial city which arose through a combination of the entrepreneurship spirit of its inhabitants and the policies of Zhejiang authorities in projecting Yiwu and its markets as the worldwide hub of small commodities (Jacobs 2016). The stories of everyday sociality in Changchun, and the types of conviviality fashioned in diverse urban spaces within Yiwu demonstrate that the potentials of people to cluster and associate to one another are only partially inflected by the more

recent history of Yiwu and the local government's efforts in shaping the city as highly attractive to foreign traders (Rui in this issue). In the context of China's grand initiatives such as the New Silk Road, the Eurasian Bridge and the Belt and Road, scholars have discussed how diverse populations and trading networks have been moving, working and operating along these routes (to different pace and degrees) without the alleged provision of such newly-flanged grand schemes (e.g. Chang 2012; Karrars 2016; Marsden 2017). Equally, Changchun neighbourhood responds to profounder historical processes that overlap these initiatives, yet also supersede them and the city. The merchants' claims to reputable trajectories as ways of playing out their hierarchies of trade respond, to certain extent, to historical processes beyond Yiwu that had produced throughout centuries the possibilities of certain languages, ethnic/national categories and their stereotypes as being mutually intelligible and recognisable to one another. In this regard, Changchun reflects the multinational character of the former Soviet Union, as well as the historical encounters of diverse multi-ethnic populations that included labourers and merchants along the China-Russia-Central Asian border regions in the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries.⁹ These revived forms of sociality can be undoubtedly seen in the languages spoken in Changchun, as well as in the stereotypes of traders and related personnel from disparate nationalities every so often the topic of conversations over dinner after a long day of walking in Yiwu's Futian market. These may include Russians deriding their Russian-speaking Chinese agents who frequently hail from the Heilongjiang province and grew up listening or learning Russian language (cf. Fedorova 2013). They are said to have incomprehensible accents and to be 'dirty' (*griaznye*) and untrustworthy.¹⁰ In return, these Chinese agents often express their scorn for Russian traders: men are portrayed as being 'rude' (*grubyi*) and 'alcoholic' (*alkash*), and women, although very beautiful, are said to be capricious (*kapriznye*). Besides, Russians are said to be unable to learn a word in Mandarin even if they had worked and purchased their merchandises in China for decades (cf. Fedorova 2011).

In this context, Bahrom's claims that Uzbek traders from Tajikistan, such as himself and his father, have a long pedigree in commerce constitutes an aspect of their efforts at shaping a good reputation for themselves in the face of recurrent accusations, often in joking tones, by Russian-speaking Chinese and Uyghurs that Central Asians are beginners. Tajikistan's Uzbek trader usually attempt to contest other allegations in

Changchun about not having enough capital to conduct businesses of bigger scale such as exporting numerous containers every week (as Azeri trader and Uzbekistan's citizens are said of being able to do); opening cargo companies in Yiwu with their own lorries (as Russian-speaking Han Chinese are alleged to own), or factories in China (as 'Arabs' are spoken about as establishing). They also have to navigate the negative stereotypes surrounding Central Asian men by Russian-speaking independent traders visiting the city. Some of them arrive to Yiwu in organised shopping-tours from Russian cities, and are familiar with Uzbeks, Tajiks and Kyrgyz in their capacity of underprivileged labour-migrants working abroad. Bahrom's emphasis on his family reputation as merchants, and the necessity of displaying an upright comportment in Changchun on a daily basis are vital for him to attract Russian-speaking traders as his clients, to obtain merchandises on credit for them from Futian, and more broadly, to make his company thrive in such a competitive and unforgiving environment. Attracting new clients and business ventures, however, implies different types of risks as now I analyse.

New clients: Risk, debt and losing face in Yiwu

In April 2017 I met Bahrom again, this time in Dushanbe. His company in Yiwu had shut down four months earlier, and having failed to renew his Chinese visa, he had been forced to go back to live in Tajikistan. His wholesale bijouterie shops in Dushanbe's Kurbon bazaar were still operating successfully, and his father and mother were still able to obtain short-term China visas to return to Yiwu for the short trips they needed to make in order to supply their shops with new products. All in all, however, Bahrom's company in Yiwu had brought him a considerable loss in monetary terms, as well as problems with clients and family, and a damaged reputation with some of his Chinese suppliers. Bahrom then proceeded to recall his experiences over the last four months.

Bahrom's work with the handful of clients he had established in Yiwu generated enough income to send money to Dushanbe, and to maintain his company that incurred expenses such as the rent of a small office and a flat in Changchun. At times, however, it was the profit in Dushanbe's bazaars that paid for his expenses in Yiwu. Then, Bahrom was often questioned by his wife and parents about why he did not want to return to Dushanbe. It was under such family pressure that in May 2016

Bahrom took risks with the aim of making big profits and stop his family's questions about his choice to live abroad. Bahrom met Shodijon, a Dushanbe-based trader born in Kulob, southern Tajikistan. Shodijon had arrived in Yiwu from Guangzhou, and was on his first trip to the city. Shodijon was a civil engineer working in a reputed building company in Tajikistan, allegedly ran by a member of the presidential family also from Kulob. In recent years, Shodijon oversaw the procurement of pipes and cables from China for a new building-project of apartment compounds in Tajikistan's capital. The trips to China were paid by the company he worked for, yet, at the same time, Shodijon also began trading independently: in addition to procuring goods for the company, he bought merchandise to sell to his clients in Dushanbe's Sulton Kabir bazaar, a market that specialises in construction material. Shodijon told Bahrom that one of his friends, a wealthy businessman, had begun working in quarries in Tajikistan and would supply materials for the building company he worked for: he invited Bahrom to be part of the business on condition that he helped him to buy in China five stone crushing machines. Bahrom had no previous knowledge of Shodijon, but believed in his credentials as an engineer, the employee of a recognised company, and a newly established independent trader. As he was not familiar with this type of equipment, Bahrom spent more than two weeks conducting research about crushing machines and visiting several factories. Bahrom decided on a supplier based near to Beijing who sold him the crushing machines at a price of US\$4300 each; Bahrom then sold the machines to Shodijon for US\$5000 each plus the expenses of transportation to Tajikistan.

A profit of about US\$3500 in a couple of weeks was worth the hazard, Bahrom explained to me, because working for a client buying in Futian market for a week usually brought him no more than US\$100-200 as a commission for placing orders. The risks of this business, however, included Bahrom's lack of experience in machinery: he could easily have been deceived in price and quality by the manufacturer. The second and most important risk was the fact that Bahrom had to pay for the machines in China and recover his money once the machines arrived in Dushanbe. Bahrom did not have enough money to pay for five machines, so he paid for three and took two on a credit agreement that required him to pay the remaining dues to the supplier within three months. The machines arrived in Dushanbe in the summer of 2016 and Shodijon took the machines away, but did not pay off his debts to Bahrom as agreed. Bahrom called him persistently; Bahrom's father and brothers

put Shodijon under pressure by visiting his house and working place and directly requesting the money. After a couple of months during which Shodijon had promised to pay for the machines, he began to threaten Bahrom: Shodijon alleged that the machines were faulty and he would therefore not pay his debt. Finally, Shodijon went into hiding. At the same time, Bahrom had lost the money he invested in three machines and had the Chinese supplier putting pressure on him to pay the remaining funds in China.

In such a desperate situation and without enough clients, Bahrom decided to close his office in Yiwu and return to Dushanbe to live from the profit of his whole-sale shops. If he wanted to return to China, he had to make enough money to pay for his debt with the supplier near Beijing as, apparently, he had already 'stained' Bahrom's name in Yiwu. Because Bahrom found this supplier through the advice of Russian-speaking Chinese acquaintances in Yiwu, the factory's owner spread the word amongst these same acquaintances that Bahrom had fled the city without paying his debts. He also posted Bahrom's details via WeChat and other internet-based platforms of social media where Chinese suppliers and factory owners usually name and shame foreign traders who run away without paying their debts –apparently with the aim of preventing other suppliers providing old debtors with credit. In addition, Bahrom's shops in Kurbon bazaar were not producing enough profit as in previous years: the exchange rate of the Tajik somoni in relation to the dollar was fluctuating and reducing the profit margins made on the sale of goods imported from China. Bahrom described his situation to me as being at its lowest ever.

In this context, Bahrom and his father expressed their frustrations about being unable to up-grade their trading activities towards the sectors where 'real money' was to be made in Tajikistan: construction and machinery. They told me that 'newcomers' such as Shodijon and especially from Tajikistan's Kulob region were benefiting from their kinship ties and alliances with the presidential family. The questions surrounding Shodijon's case and Bahrom's sense of marginalisation are evoked as being related to the status of Uzbeks as a minority in contemporary Tajikistan, as well as to the current political outline of Tajikistan's state lead by President Rahmon and his family. Tajikistan's President, in power since 1992, portrays himself and his family as Tajiks hailing from the country's south (Kulob region, more specifically Danghara); this ruling elite have positioned their companies and enterprises in the main sectors of the

economy in the past two decades.¹¹ On the one hand, Kulobi identity and government-led ideas of the 'purity' of the Tajik 'race' have flourished as a symbol of government authority. On the other, negative stereotypes of Kulobis have been popularised among non-Kulobi population; thus Kulobis have come to be regarded as symbols of intimidation and the unmerited appropriation of the country's resources, aspects of life in the country referred by some scholars as 'Kulyabisation' (cf. Marsden 2012; Fumigalli 2007).¹²

Against this background, Bahrom and his family alleged that companies owned by people from Kulob were usually given the permissions to build new apartment blocks in the capital, and also obtained government contracts for other public projects. As traders of Uzbek rather than Tajik background, Bahrom and his family could not win a contract to supply such companies with building materials even if they demonstrably had the capacity, experience and connections to purchase all types of goods in China and beyond. They boasted that their contacts included old acquaintances in Russia and India, as well as their old business partners in Germany, but that there was no space for them in Tajikistan's market. Finally, they concluded that Bahrom's undertaking with the crushing machines had failed not because Bahrom had been stupid or inexperienced, but because Kulobis 'protect one another' and therefore, Shodijon had been able to hide himself whilst being protected from 'above'.¹³

My encounters with traders from the Kulob region involved in the purchase of building material, only partially confirmed the perceptions held by Bahrom and his family. These encounters further problematise simplistic notions of clear-cut differences between Tajik and Uzbek identities in Tajikistan. In Kulob city I spoke to a Tajik man who worked for a famous company that ran petrol stations in Tajikistan and that has direct links to the presidential family. Although he said that he did not act as an independent trader, but as an expert advisor on the type of goods required for this line of business, he usually travelled to China to procure the necessary goods and materials for the maintenance of the petrol pumps. Another man from the town of Vose', also in Kulob region, told me that he had gained a government contract to supply building materials for the new stadium that was being built in Vose' with the sponsorship of the regional and national government. He explained to me that the contract has been given to him because of his friendship with the owners of the company in charge of the construction project – who also happened to be related to

the presidential family. Yet, he emphasised additionally that he had a long experience of working in China: having commenced trading in Urumqi in the 1990s, he married a Uyghur woman (he divorced her 8 years later). Over more than ten years, he had been involved in the import of building materials purchased from Uyghur suppliers to Tajikistan. Although he described himself as Tajik, he told me that his mother was Uzbek, and that he had grown up speaking the Uzbek language in the village near Vose' where he spent his childhood. Indeed, in the Kulob region there are numerous villages and towns well-known for their families of mixed Uzbek and Tajik background.

These cases demonstrate that Bahrom's claims of being unable to up-grade his business towards a more profitable sector is indeed related to the patron-client relations in which Tajikistan's politics and economics evolve. Yet, as the last case elucidates, the identity of Uzbeks in Tajikistan is fluid and cannot be pinned down to something that is exclusive and well-bounded, and thus that can be used to one-dimensionally explain why Bahrom and his family are unable to enter the business in building materials. These claims also need to be understood in terms of the articulation of hierarchies of trade within both Tajikistan and Yiwu: marginalisation on the grounds of being Uzbek were partly deployed as a way of defending Bahrom's and his family's reputation as experienced, skilful and honest traders at moments in which they were forced to close their company in Yiwu. Assertions of marginalisation on identity lines allowed them to preserve a respectable name among other traders in both Changchun and Dushanbe in a period when they were being described by others as having 'lost face' in China due to Bahrom's miscalculations and his resulting unpaid debt.

Conclusion

In this article, I have revealed how Bahrom's grandfather traded flowers during the Soviet period to Moscow; Aka Akmal's traded flowers and gold to India and Bangladesh and scrap metal to Germany; Bahrom and his parents conducted shuttle-trade activities in Urumqi before finally Bahrom was able to establish his company in Yiwu. These trading trajectories are embedded in the ways in which hierarchies of trade aim at building a respectable reputation for this evolving merchant family. Very importantly, these types of histories indicate that although the wave of shuttle-trade of the 1990s evidences the salience of new forms of commerce and mobility at the end of the Soviet era, ethnographic investigations on contemporary long-distance trade in

the post-socialist realm demand a careful consideration of the historical depth of the zones of contact and exchange that precede the 20th century. Given the diversity in the trading activities of Tajikistan's Uzbeks, this article is unable to make generalisations about the trading activities of this 'minority' as a whole, or their commercial strength in Tajikistan more generally. Yet, by presenting Bahrom's family's trajectory and locating their history in the socio-economic and political context of Tajikistan today, I hope to stimulate further research about Central Asia's Uzbek merchants, and their role in trade across the region as well as with China (e.g. Balci 2003; Shahadeo 2011).

The warming up of bilateral relations between China and the Soviet Union from 1983, combined with the economic growth of China, the demise of the Soviet Union and the more recent initiatives such as the New Silk Road, the Eurasian Bridge and the Belt and Road have enabled, to an extent, the movement and interaction of peoples of different backgrounds from China, Central Asia and Russia – often with the purposes of trade. In addition to these relatively new processes, I have suggested that the forms of conviviality enacted in Changchun as well as the way in which traders such as Bahrom position themselves within Yiwu's hierarchies of trade need to be understood in terms of the previous historical and multinational contacts that have occurred within the spaces of the former Soviet Union, as well as along the China-Russia and China-Central Asian borders. In the context of Yiwu, I have argued that the articulation of hierarchies of trade in Changchun neighbourhood is shaped in everyday sociality and in response to the mockery uttered by Uyghurs, Russian-speaking Chinese and other Russian-speaking traders more broadly who, at times, depict Central Asians merchants as stupid, inexperienced or uneducated.

Finally, the articulation of Bahrom's hierarchies of trade in Tajikistan emphasises this family's Uzbek background and their historical pedigree as traders in contrast to depictions of Tajik 'newcomers' - inexperienced traders lacking merit who usually, although not always, were referred as to hailing from Tajikistan's Kulob region and thus alleged to have connections and protection from the political elites who control the access to Tajikistan's resources and most profitable companies. On the one hand, Shodijon, the man who cheated Bahrom and was thus implicated in the demise of his company in Yiwu, benefitted from the patronage of an unidentified figure in Tajikistan able to let him escape without paying off his debts. On the other hand, those company-based

and independent traders from the Kulob region might be able to identify themselves or their ancestors as Uzbek in some contexts. So, this is not a straightforward story of regionalism or Tajik/Uzbek rivalry. Bahrom's assertions about being unable to upgrade his business to the more profitable construction companies reflect Tajikistan's economic and political affairs today, but his claims about the patronage of the 'newcomers' were also a way in which he attempted to recuperate his reputation as a good trader after the great risks and miscalculations he had taken in Yiwu with the crushing machines. After all, Bahrom was foreseeing the continuation of his trading activities, and also expressed a desire of returning to live in China – possibly Yiwu.

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¹ Words in brackets are in Tajik and Russian language. Following anthropological convention I have used pseudonyms for all people referred to in this text.

² I conducted 7 months of fieldwork in Yiwu, China (2016), and one month in Tajikistan (2017). The research methods include participant observation, open-ended interviews, and mapping of Yiwu's neighbourhoods and markets, and Dushanbe's bazaars.

³ Bahrom is fluent in all these languages, and we all communicate with one another in Russian. At points during our encounters, Bahrom switched to communicate with me in Tajik, to his Chinese friends in Mandarin, and to his Uyghur associates in Uyghur and Uzbek.

⁴ The number of traders from Tajikistan operating in Yiwu are relatively small in comparison to other major trading networks in the city. In 2016, there were three well-established trading and cargo companies and two restaurants from Tajikistan in Yiwu. I spoke with approximately thirty male and female traders from Tajikistan in Yiwu both of Uzbek and Tajik background. The great majority of them were temporary visitors to Yiwu who stayed on business trips usually lasting little more than two weeks.

⁵ People in Yiwu use the generic *alabo* (Arab in Mandarin) to refer to traders from the Middle East. My interlocutors that night mentioned that among the *alabo* they knew, Iraqi, Syrian and Yemeni traders are the most reputable and successful.

⁶ For an analysis of 'shuttle-trade' (*chelnoki*) from the 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of socialism see: Humphrey (1999); Özcan (2010); Piart (2013); Spector (2017). For an examination on how these practices became to be associated to semi-legal and shameful forms of trade see: Holzlehner (2014); Mukhina (2009); Niyozov and Shamatov (2006); Humphrey and Skvirskaja (2009); Humphrey and Mandel eds. (2002).

⁷ On the Pamir Highway and related commercial routes see: Mostowlansky (2017), chapter 2.

⁸ Flowers were of great importance in the Soviet Union. Giving flowers in special occasions and during festivities such as Women's Day was a symbol of, and a practice aiming at shaping 'civilized' and loyal Soviet subjects and citizens. Therefore, lavish displays of flowers were also salient aspects of military parades and related commemorations.

⁹ For an examination of the diverse populations that migrated from China to Russia and from Russia to China in the 19th century see Dastyshen (2012); Peshkov (2018); Holzheimer (2014). For the migration of Chinese citizens to Central Asia in the 20th century see Sadovskaya (2012), and for the multi-national encounters among traders in the China-Central Asian borders in the 20th century see: Alff (2016), Steenberg (2016), Parham (2016).

¹⁰ For an analysis of negative stereotypes surrounding Chinese workers and merchants in Russia from the 19th century see Bille (2012); Holzheimer (2014); Peshkov (2018); Ryzhova (2018), Skvirskaja (this issue).

¹¹ For a more thorough analysis of how Tajikistan's companies are not simply co-opted by elite networks, but also involve global actors such as multinational corporations and international donor agencies see Heathershaw (2011).

¹² The majority of people from Kulob do not have contacts with the ruling family and have not directly benefited from the current Kulobi elites within the Tajik government (see Ibañez Tirado 2015b).

¹³ For a discussion on patron-client relations and patronage in Tajikistan see Ibañez Tirado (forthcoming).